

Disrupt Yourself Podcast with Whitney Johnson

Episode 82: Saul Kaplan

Whitney: Welcome to the Disrupt Yourself Podcast. My name is Whitney Johnson. I think, write, speak and live all things disruption. My guest in this episode is Saul Kaplan, the CEO and founder of the [Business Innovation Factory](#), a consultancy that helps education, social services, and healthcare develop new business models. He's also the founder of the [BIF Summit](#), an intimate TED-like conference, which takes place in Providence, Rhode Island every fall. Saul, welcome to the podcast.

Saul: Whitney, it's so great to hear your voice and, and to be with you. Uh, psyched for our conversation today.

Whitney: So, let's start off, Saul by asking you, um, where you grew up and what you thought you were gonna be when you grow up?

Saul: Yeah. So, uh, Whitney, I guess, uh, the, the disclaimer, I'd put it at the front end of this, is I'm not sure that I have grown up, um, you know to be, to be honest with you, and I think that's a good ...

Whitney: (Laughing)

Saul: Uh, I think that's a good thing. Uh, I, you know, grew up geographically in New England, uh, although, we moved around, uh, throughout my career, uh, out of New England, and then back, uh, but-but-but always came back. I've always been an innovation junkie. I've always been about, you know, what's next, what's better. I've, uh, I've always been like trying to see the future and to help realize it, and all through my career, I've always been focused on learning curve.

I, I just believe this idea that if I stayed on a steep learning curve, I knew myself well enough to know, you know, that, uh, I do my best work, uh, when I do that, uh, and so, I've just always done that, uh, through a combination of working directly in the industry. I worked in Big Pharma, you know, to becoming a road warrior consultant, uh, where I worked in big, uh, strategy consulting firms. You know, I was a senior partner at Accenture, uh, working in pharma, healthcare, uh, medical products and devices, and then I even became an accidental bureaucrat, uh, where I worked in state government here in my home state of Rhode Island, where I got to see innovation through the lens of the local, uh, community, so I've always allowed myself to move to a new learning curve and to bring everything I've learned from the previous one, uh, into a whole new sandbox, uh, in order to shape new ideas and practices. Uh, and that's really what's, uh, what's driven me throughout my career.

Whitney: One of the things I love and, uh, that you've said, and I've-I've actually quoted you on numerous occasions is that, and I'm gonna see if I can get it right, and you can correct me, but you said something along the lines of you're always seeking out the steep learning curve, swinging like Tarzan from one curve to the next.

Saul: A lot of people do the hard work to get up a learning curve so that they can rest on the plateau, and that's where they get a lot of their leverage, right? They, uh, whether it's making money, or promotions, or how many people report to you, and I never really got off on that. Uh, uh, I was really all about, you know, staying on the learning curve, uh, and, and so it felt like swinging from vine to vine, and just as people, you know, stick with the vine they've got, I was always the one trying to jump to the new one and bring with me, uh, wu-the super powers I had, uh, uh, been blessed to have from the, from the previous learning curve, so to me, that's what an innovation junkie does.

You know, you're never satisfied, the job is never done, you're always focused on what's next, and, and as you know, I've always felt that that's a blessing and a curse. You know, it's a blessing 'cause you're always trying to help people's lives improve, uh, and to bring in new ideas, products and services and business models to the world, but it's also a little bit of a curse because you drive the people around you crazy, 'cause you're always trying to improve it, and you don't celebrate your wins very much, but I'll take the blessing, uh, every day.

Whitney: Yeah. I-la, I just love that image, swinging like Tarzan from one curve to the next. And then you've said, and you kind of alluded to this, but your belief that money, stature and happiness will always follow when you're willing to move to-from one curve to the next. And, and one of the curves that you've jumped to, and this was probably well over a decade ago now is you launched a conference called, the [Business Innovation Factory Summit](#). Many people call it 'BIF', and it's been named by Forbes as 'One of the top five conferences that will expand your mind'. Can you talk to us a little bit about why you started this conference?

Saul: I knew we needed a way to really understand, uh, this new idea of, of human-centered design and social engagement and storytelling, which everybody was starting to talk about 10 years ago, that there was some new way to think about innovation that wasn't top-down that you couldn't analyze your way to it, that it was generative. You know, and I'm a classic, uh, scientist MBA. You know, everything had to be analyzed to death before we did anything, so I knew that we needed a new lens, a new way to think about that, and so when we founded BIF, we knew one of the things we were gonna do, you know, was try to bring people that were, or struggling with these same set of questions, uh, together. It's now been 14 years, uh, and, uh, the summit's actually, uh, coming up here shortly.

It's the two most inspiring days of the year. We put it together because we knew we needed an organic way to understand what self-organizing means. "What does it mean, you know, to create purposeful networks organically as opposed to, you know, from the top of the organization down?", and so, we did this summit. You know, I'm very friendly as you know with [Richard Saul Wurman, uh, who founded TED](#). And he's been a friend and mentor to me, you know, throughout the whole 14 years, uh, and I knew I wanted something that inspired like TED, but that was much more, uh, connected where people who attended, you know, felt like they were part of a community, so we've never grown above 500.

Uh, and every year, 500 innovation junkies from around the world come to, to here to Providence, Rhode Island. Uh, and basically, what we do is we just explore new ways to collide and to collaborate. We call it 'Random Collisions of Unusual Suspects' or making a RCUS, and we believe the real innovation gold is in the gray area between our ideas, our disciplines, our silos, and that we need to get much better, uh, and more comfortable hanging at the edge where all of that messiness happens so that we can pull the ideas and capabilities and collaborations that could actually help us to change the world, and so that's the, the idea behind the summit, and it works beautifully every year, and relationships as you know, 'cause you've been to so many of them, you know, that, uh, last a lifetime.

Whitney: You know, it's interesting hearing you talk about this. Uh, so, so you had this background, you had been a consultant, you'd looked at innovation from the top-down, and you, a-and you had done it, and in many ways, it had worked, but you had this sense, and as, uh, a-as a number of people did of like we've got to look at i-innovation from the bottom up, from the human, as you said the human-centered design, and so, uh, if I'm hearing you correctly, you wanted this conference to be a microcosm or, or really a, um, a living, breathing entity of what it is you were trying to accomplish or how you were thinking about the world. Is that, is that accurate?

Saul: Uh, that's absolutely right. I-I really believe that if you're going to transform anything, if you're going to change it, right, you have to, you-you, you have to imagine it, but then you have to model it. You have to try to it on. You have to see what it means to think that way, to behave that way, to organize in a different way, and this is what's getting in the way of all of our innovation efforts because we're still back in that world, uh, of analyze your way to the right answer, let's never fail, let's only do those things that we can predict what's gonna happen, and if you do that, you're only ever going to, do incremental improvements. You're never gonna really transform anything, and so you have to model it, including the way we interact, communicate, and collaborate, and the summit was really just a way to go up that learning curve, to model it, to see if it works.

We don't over-engineer the summit. We create the conditions for those Random Collisions of Unusual Suspects to happen, uh, and we, even me who has the blessing of hosting it, you know, and sitting on the stage, it's a blessing to me because I never know where the summit's gonna go, right? We don't prescribe, you know, what the storytellers or speakers say from the stage. We allow it to emerge, and the 500 innovation junkies from around the world, they're the ones who decide what's important, what patterns make sense to them, what collaborations are worthwhile to pursue. I mean, we don't have any boring breakout sessions.

We allow people to collide and collaborate, and we trust them. It's trusting your audience, trusting the customer to be part of the innovation process. That's the big 'Ah-ha' that we've really tried to leverage at BIF.

Whitney: So, what I wanna do is go back to when you did your very first conference, 'cause I think one of the things is, in addition to this idea of Business Innovation Factory, is people sometimes want to put on a show, right? They want to create this RCUS, the Random Collision of Unusual Sus-Suspects. Do you remember how you first felt when you

organized the very first summit, what you were trying to accomplish, the conversation that you had with Richard Saul Wurman? What did that look like? How did it feel, and-and what do you feel like you accomplished in that very first summit 14, 15 years ago?

Saul: Well, I'm-I'm smiling as you ask me the question 'cause I have a very fond memory of it and remember it specifically. I'll never forget going down ... Uh, uh, Richard, uh, lived in Newport at the time. You know, he since moved to Florida, but he lived here in Rhode Island, and so I would go down, uh, to visit Richard as often as he would have me. I mean, I just learned so much from hanging, uh, with him and, and allowing him, you know, to teach me, you know, to share experiences with me. And I went in there when I said I was gonna do a summit, you know, and he was patient enough with me, and I laid out, you know, my-sp, my spreadsheet if you will, right?

Classic science MBA training. I had a very sophisticated matrix, you know, of how we were gonna go up and down scale from nano, you know to cosmic. And I'll never forget Richard, you know, kinda looked at me. He looked at the piece of paper, and he said, "Do you really want me to share with you, Saul, um, uh, what I think?", and I said, "Yes. Of course, Richard."

And he said, "Well, you have an awful lot to learn, Kaplan, uh, about what, uh, organic engagement and connection is." And he took the piece of paper, and right in front of me, he ripped it up into small pieces, and he said, "Now, let's go to work." And-And really, we started talking about what are the conditions for helping people go up a learning curve, people that are, that share an optimism, people that share a willingness to experiment with things that are uncomfortable and different, you know, and to try it a different way. Uh, and he basically said, "Look, Saul. Design something that you're interested in, that you can learn from, and then allow other people to participate in that by doing it openly and transparently."

And those simple insights, you know, remain to this day. We, we don't pile on more programming. We work on the conditions. We always say that our summit is more about community than event. The event is so cool because there's a community of like-minded innovation junkies that want to explore that gray area between us and open up that, uh, all those new spaces and opportunity.

Whitney: Well, and I will say definitely have felt that having attended on several occasions, is that sense of community. It's very, very, very rich. So, I wanna go back now to the very first summit. I-I think that's a wonderful story you just told. Do you remember who some of your first guests were at that very first summit?

Saul: (Laughing) Oh, oh, well I remember in the beginning, I was, I was too frightened, uh, to be, you know, kind of the, the facilitator on stage, and so, uh, and we were too new and I wanted to have some more name recognition 'cause I thought that's what it would take. You know I, like I thought it was about name recognition, you know, so I asked Richard, uh, you know, I asked my friend, John Seely Brown, uh, my friend, Walt Mossberg, you know, some of the other, you know, big names of folks, you know, that are more known, you know, out in the innovation space. I asked them to co-host it, you know, so they were the ones who would literally be on stage, and it wasn't until, you

know, probably, uh, year, I'm gonna say maybe year three or four. You know, and Richard really was the impetus behind this where he said like, "Stop hiding behind us as co-host. You know, you know, excuse my French." "You know, put your ass up on the stage. You know, you were born to facilitate this", and I've done it, uh, ever since, and that's-

Whitney: That's so interesting. Sorry I interrupted. Go ahead. Finish what you were gonna say.

Saul: No, no.

Whitney: (Laughs)

Saul: No. I've been, I've been doing it ever since then. It's one of my greatest joys in life, you know to be ... I-I call myself the 'Chief Catalyst' here at BIF, and I did that on purpose because I knew that my role was to catalyze, to get a reaction started, but then to trust the, the stakeholders, trust the customers, trust the people that were engaged, right, to, to create their own story, uh, and trust it, you know, to go in, in really good and constructive, uh, directions, and boy, has that ever worked.

Whitney: Yeah, and it's so interesting. What I think is really fun for me is to hear you say that and watch, um ... I went to the summit, um, in 2017, and watched you on stage and how comfortable you are, I love that you're willing to share that early on, you wanted a co-host 'cause you were scared, and yet, to see now how comfortable you are, I-I think that's a wonderful, um, uh, uh, story of-of you m-moving up the learning curve, and in this particular instance, you had, had Richard Saul Wurman kinda push you off and say, uh, "You know, come on. It's your conference. You need to get up there. You need to facilitate it. This is what you do. This is who you are." And I love that story. So, thank you for sharing that.

For someone who's thinking that they'd like to put on some type of conference or summit of some sort of another, what advice would you give to them?

Saul: Yeah. I-I think it really goes back to this simple idea, like don't think of it as a conference, right? Don't think of this as an event that you're trying to produce, 'cause that's too top-down, right? Think about what you're expecting to have happened there, what you want the experience to be for the people that are there, how to put the people at the convening, uh, whatever the size of it is, at the center of your designed process, right? And then, create the conditions, you know, to bring that vision to life, right, which is where we get the, it's more about community.

I mean, I tell ... You know, you've ... You know, you've been a storyteller, uh, on the stage several times, uh, at our summit, a-and you've heard me, you know, talk about, you know, the night before the summit where I say, "Aas much as I love all, uh, of the storytellers", right? And these are people that are, are, are serious people. They're distinguished.

They publish books like you. You know, they've been on the world stage, and I say, "You know what? It's not about you." Right? It's about us being a catalyst for the conditions that will allow all those other people to have an experience that they will remember and that, that will last longer than the two days, uh, of the summit, and so my favorite stories every year are people that come up to me, you know, and say, "I went to your summit eight years ago, you know, and I collided with these people, and I maintained relationships with them, and let me tell you about the work we're doing together and how we're changing the world."

Whitney: What are, what are those stories? Can you think of one?

Saul: Uh, it happens ... Uh, it happens almost every week now, I mean, this 14 years of doing this, right, where people-

Whitney: So what's one story? Tell us a story?

Saul: What?

Whitney: Tell us a story?

Saul: Oh my God, you got me ... Uh, well, let me turn that around to you. I-I bet you could tell the story for heaven's sakes.

Whitney: (Laughing)

Saul: Like how many people that have you connected with there that are now integral, you know, and, and part of your life? I mean, connections. Uh, you know, uh, like let's-let's call out [Deb Mills Scofield](#), you know, who's, uh, you know, who's a joint friend of ours, right, you know, and, you know, really lives our principles, probably better than we do, right?

Whitney: Right. Right. I agree.

Saul: You know, and so, so we, we learned from, from her. I mean, she's taken this idea. I think she's the one who shortened Random Collision of Unusual Suspects to RCUS, which was just so beautiful, uh, uh, and she's been, uh, almost at every single summit, and you watch how she connects with people. And you can tell that it's not about ... It's not an event, right? You know, it's a journey.

It's a commu ... It's a community, and I watch how-sh, how Deb connects to people, and is truly in the spirit of helping others around her because it helps her get better, uh, that you can't help but get better faster when you hang around people like that. It makes you want to get better. It makes you want to learn, and that's really what, what it's all about, you know, connecting with people that, Yeah, we're ... I mean, we're optimistic, so we don't spend enormous amounts of time admiring problems, right? We get right to, "Could we model a different solution?"

"You know, could we carve out the space or conditions in the real world to try it?" Right? We know it might not work and, uh, and that's okay, and that happens all the time, you know, at, at the summit, and then those connections, you know, start to get real, and then they come back and enter my life again.

Whitney: I actually just thought of a couple things I want to just share with you. So for example, last year, um, when I went to BIF in 2017, I heard [Philip Sheppard speak](#), and subsequently, um, connected with him, who's this amazing cellist. And those of you who listen to the Disrupt Yourself Podcast will have had an [opportunity to hear Philip](#) and his fascinating stories. So that's a great example of the RCUS. Um, another example, and I want to ask you to tell a story in just a minute, Saul, and, and then I'm going to give you a minute to think while I tell a story.

Can you think of one summit where you thought it was going to go in one direction, kind of this top-down idea, and it went in a completely different direction? Like for example, the talks that you thought were going to resonate were good, but the ones that really stood out were completely unexpected and just this kind of surprise.

And so, while you're thinking about that, I want to tell you and our listeners a quick story and, uh, of my own experience of, of having this happen, is last year, 2017, so by the time you all are getting to listen to this, the summit for 2018 will have passed, and so you'll have to sign up for 2019, but my story of 2017, I had shown up and, um, I think it was just ... I was supposed to talk about one topic, and the night before, the night before I was supposed to speak ... This has never happened before.

It hasn't happened since. Um, I was talking to one of the fellows, and I think it's Chris Rice. He says to me, "I don't think you should talk about what you're gonna talk about. I think you should talk about the emotional side of disruption." I'm like, "What?" Like, right in the gut.

I'm like Miss, uh, Overprepare, but he tells me that the night before, "I think you should change what you're gonna speaking, uh, speak about." I took the challenge, and I did, and I will say, and Saul, you'll have to tell me, I think it's [one of the best talks I've given. I re-listened to it like a month or so ago](#), and I was like, "That was good." So, Saul, uh, is that a good example to you of like, uh, this kind of improvisation that occurred with the stakeholder saying, "I wanna hear this story", people telling you different story. [Kare Anderson](#), same thing.

Saul: Well-

Whitney: Anyway, so, what-what are your thoughts?

Saul: (Laughs) Well, first of all, uh, Whitney, again, uh, you got me smiling here. Uh, you know, I have watched you over the years, right, uh, uh, uh, just taking the times that you've shared a story on our stage. I'm pretty sure it's three, at least maybe four, you know, times you've been on the stage, and I have watched you and your confidence, and your ability first to be able, you know, to confidently and powerfully share a

personal, genuine narrative, but then, to get to the point where you had the confidence and felt comfortable, you know, to be able to change the story right at the end to take the personal risk to be able to do it. And this happens every year to us, right, that, that stories that storytellers and speakers think that they're going to share after they've watched the first day, day and a half, you know, and now it's their turn to share the story, they know they need to do something different, and B, they know that we make it safe to do. Uh, we create the conditions, right, to do that, so storytellers over the years, right, no matter how famous these people are have said they really love the experience because, um, somehow, we seem to get people to, to do it differently, to not pull the PowerPoint deck, you know, out of the drawer, or to give this, this, this-the talk, you know, that they've given a hundred times that they, they experiment and try something new.

And that's the kind of behavior, you know, that we always, you know, want, and that's why it's so, uh, incredible and, uh, unpredictable. I mean, uh, uh, it-it, every year, it's the same for me. I mean, I could pick almost any year and say, "If you ask me beforehand what do I think it's going to be about, you know, and then ask me later what emerged, right, it's always different", and that's why I look forward to it so much. There have been number of years where, where, uh, I've tried to stack the deck. You know, I'm a, I'm a geek wannabe and I know the role of emerging technology is so critical, you know, to the transformation process, so I always bring in storytellers who can bring us that lens, you know, the-the-the real geeky folks who go really deep on emerging technologies like AI, or blockchain.

Uh, and, uh, I always say, "This is going to be the year, you know, where the themes are going to emerge, and they're going to be about emerging tech", uh, and then it just never happens because our crowd is so human-centered, and skew so much to solving real problems in the world, that they love having access to the knowledge about new technologies, but they know it's not the technology that's central. It's about human and customer experience. It's about imagining a different future, and then using the tools we have to get there. And so every year, you know, when I think it's going to go one way, you know, the, uh, the crowd really comes back to tell me what's important and to reinforce, uh, what's important. And that's why, uh, it's so valuable to all of us here at BIF, even though we're the ones who curate it. You know, we get to learn as much as anybody, uh, and get just as inspired, uh, as everyone who participates.

Whitney: Yeah. Yeah. Um, uh, I guess one, one final thought on that, and then I think you've, you've given us a nice segue to do about what you do the other 363 days (laughs) of the year, um, is I remember it was either in 2016, I think it was 2016, maybe 2015, but [Kare Anderson, who has also been on my podcast](#), um, and she had planned to give one talk, and I remember the day she stood up, and in fact, I took my inspiration from her as she said, she told a story about how she stuttered when she grew up, and it was just riveting. Absolutely riveting, and people could not stop talking about the story that Kare Anderson's told, that she had not intended to tell until that day. And so, to me, that's really, uh, a powerful testament.

Like you said, the sense that there's, it's safe enough, there's a community there of people who, who feel like they can show up in a different way than they usually do on a

stage, which I think brings me now to what you do as I said the rest of the year. And you-you've made a comment about how it's very human-centered, um, about how you t-ried to structure the conference. Is that, um, a good template? Is that a good way to describe what you do and the work that you do for people in the social sector, um, in healthcare, in education? Talk to us a little bit about that work that you do inside of organizations?

Saul: Yeah. Yeah, so, so what we model, uh, at this summit, uh, uh, we put to work, uh, throughout the whole year. You know, our mission is to, to make transformation safer and easier to manage. Not the small incremental change to the way the world works today, you know, but to imagine entire new ways, you know, for, uh, the world to work, and that's true at the societal level. That's true at the company or organization level, and as you so, uh, uh, elegantly remind us, it's true at the personal level, that we have to get better at the personal power of reinvention, and then learn, uh, how to explore and test, uh, uh, entire new ways to create, deliver and capture value.

We talk about business model transformation at those three levels, and so, uh, really, what we're doing, uh, the rest of the year is mining the insights that come from the summit, mining the connections, you know, and collaboration, and, uh, trying to put it together in a purposeful way in healthcare, education and public services, so we work with institutional leaders, right, uh, that are ready for transformational change, that know that they need a different approach than the way they go about incrementally improving the way the business model works today, and then we help them create the conditions in their company and in the marketplace to be able to do that. What we're trying to do is what you, uh, have pointed out so very well, that you have to disrupt yourself. You have to be willing to reinvent, and you don't do that as an all or nothing, right? You're, of course you're gonna pedal the bicycle of the way it works today, and you need to protect and build it, but where's the time? Where are the conditions?

Right? How do we make some choices in our lives and in our companies and in our communities that allow us to do the exploration? You know, I call it 'R&D for new business models', not just new technologies or products, because if we don't do that, we're very vulnerable to being disrupted by someone or some organization that can, and it's really the only way that we're gonna live up to the transformation potential, you know, the, of, uh, of the, the decades that we're fortunate enough, uh, to live in.

Whitney: So, can you give us an example of, um ... Uh, earlier, I said social services, and it's actually not social services. It's public services, but can you give us an example either in healthcare or education of some work that you've done so that people can be like, "Okay, I-I understand what it is he does"?

Saul: Sure. Yeah. Sure. I just came from, uh, uh, uh, a really exciting project that had, um, uh, a group of, of community college leaders that, that knew that they needed some help on a transformation agenda. How do we reimagine, you know, what community college is?

How do we flip it from what programs can we push out to the community and to our students, to how do we really understand student experience and help design platforms

and tools and programs that are designed for them to engage in and to be excited about, and to get better, lifelong learning outcomes? And so, uh, I literally just came from an event where we worked, uh, with some 40 presidents and leadership teams to try to help them go from reimagining what a community college might be, to thinking really deeply about, "What capabilities, uh, might be able to be deployed in a new and different way in order to transform the student experience, to reimagining new and different ways to capture the value so that they could scale it?" Uh, so, uh, we really try to deliver underneath this promise of making transformation safer and easier to manage, and some of the most inspiring work we do is with institutional leaders in education at every level, and in healthcare, uh, in every level. These are just two of the big social systems that we all know tweaks aren't enough, right, but, you know, we tend to live in this world that only seems to be able to tweak things incrementally. How do we create the confidence and the conditions and the tools to be able to approach transformation?

And that's the work we do throughout the year, so it, it builds directly from and connects to the summit and the relationships at the summit. A lot of the people, uh, that come to the summit are people that are interested in learning more about how we do that, or are working with us currently, you know, and want to connect, uh, with a lot of those unusual suspects, which are really the source of new ideas, uh, and new ways to, to create and unleash value.

Whitney: I wanna switch gears for, uh, a minute. You, um, recently tweeted ... You're a great tweeter. You're eminently quotable, like I could retweet everything you tweet, and you said, "Reframe failure as an intentional iteration. Try more stuff" with the hashtag.

Can you talk about a time where you had to do that, where you had to reframe failures and intentional iteration and, and what did you do?

Saul: Oh, oh, every day, uh, Whitney, I really believe in that. Uh, sometimes I say, you know, that, you know, the really big insight, you know, to how to do transformation work, you know, is as simple as trying more stuff. And the problem is that we've beat that out of us, right? I mean, if you watch children ... You know, I'm really blessed. You know, we have three granddaughters, uh, and I watch them, you know, and they try everything.

They're fearless. And then what happens is as you progress into school and through the industrial era school system, and then into the workforce, uh, into industrial era or, uh, institutions, we beat that out of everybody, right? And, uh, it's innate in all of us, but, but I think that, that we've beaten it out to where you don't try stuff unless you know it can work, that this notion that you can analyze it, that it can go through 18 committees, and that we're not going to spend any time or resource trying anything different, and this is what brought us the industrial era. Now, a lot of good came from that. A lot of societal good, but we all know that we live in a different era now and that we need a different, uh, approach to do it.

Whitney: So, what's one of your failures that you've had to learn from?

Saul: You talked about, uh, you know, my use of, uh, of social media. I mean, so many people think that these new platforms and ways to engage, you know, are just newfangled ways, you know, to market, you know, top-down push out ideas, you know, share ideas after they're right, and get other people to buy into them. I don't think that way at all. I think it's a generative process, so I try out new ideas, and you know, uh, as well as anybody, uh, a lot of my ideas, you know, aren't worth it, right? And I have a community of folks that I'm connected with that'll tell me right away, "You know, that's a bad idea", or, "Saul, that's a good idea and, uh, have you talked to this person? Maybe you need to talk to Whitney, or have you talked to this, uh, individual or institution 'cause they're trying it in a different way?"

So, when I say-f, uh, treat failure like intentional iteration, I don't, it doesn't even occur to me that something I might try today might fail. Of course it might fail, but it might work.

Whitney: Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Saul: And if I do enough of those, uh, experiments and stop overthinking it and trying it in the real world, right, it's amazing how many of those things might be repeatable and scalable, and might actually solve a problem in the real world,

You-you can't just talk about this stuff. You have to live it, and it's very personal, uh, for me, right? The, and so, you have to be self-aware enough to know, you know, wu-when are your super powers the right super powers, you know, to-to get something done, and when do you have to partner, you know, bring in, uh, a complimentary set of super powers given where, uh, where you are?

Uh, and this has happened throughout my career. This is nothing new for me, right? I've been through this cycle, you know, probably half a dozen times, where as long as we're on the steep learning curve and we're designing and prototyping and changing and experimenting with different capabilities, uh, I don't want to, uh, I don't want to move from it, uh, when it's at the idea stage. I like the messy stage where you're putting real capabilities in place, and seeing if it works in the real world, and you're reconfiguring them and reinventing them, you know, to try to create the outcomes, uh, that you want, but there's, uh, a time when you have to take those ideas, and you have to go back to the execution excellence that allows you to scale them.

Whitney: Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Saul: That's why I say the leader's job today is a lot trickier than it used to be. It used to be if you could just outexecute your, your peers, you could win. I call that 'Share-taking'. If you know what industry you're in and how you compete, and you know you're going to win by just outexecuting, you know, your competitors, right, that's share-taking. That's protecting and building market share in kind of a defined industry. If you live in the world that we live in today where the, uh, assumptions are changing every single day, you have to do both things.

Saul: You have to be good at share-taking, but you also have to be good at market-making, or behaving, uh, like there is no market, right, that there is no competition, right, that you don't know what capabilities are going to be necessary in order to unleash, uh, a brand new value and solve a big societal problem. Uh, and, uh, I think you have to do both as a leader these days, but I've always been about market-making. When it gets to the share-taking part of that, I know I need some people around me and, and collaborating with me that are really great at executional excellence and can stay on a strategy, uh, and scale it. And, uh, I do my best work when I'm thinking about what's next, so a lot of what I'm trying to do now, you know, is refocus on the, "What's next at BIF?", and make sure we have the leadership in place to be able to drive out the operational excellence to take the ideas and the tools that we've built, and take them to scale.

Whitney: That's interesting of the, like you said, of being self-aware to know, "Okay. You like the steep learning curve. You like jumping to that new curve, and so what does that look like? Then, who do you need around you in order when you've got this organization that you created and loved over time? What kinds of skill sets?", or as Clay, our mutual friend likes to say, "What schools of experiences, uh, of experience are needed at a given point in time, um, for, not for you as an individual, but for an organization?"

I just have a couple more questions for you as we wrap up. Um, when you retire, which I suspect will be when you're about 90 years old, and if people were asked to provide, um, some type of greeting for you, or to describe you as if it were sort of a career epitaph, um, what kind of tweet would you want them to tweet out about you?

Saul: Yup. Well, I mean, I would hope, you know that, uh, that, that the epitaph would say "Innovation junkie", you know, "He tried tried more stuff", right, um, uh, because that's really the way I've, I've really tried to model, you know, my career and what I do, and I don't see that any differently, you know, in the ...

Whitney: (Laughing)

Saul: You know, I-I, I don't, uh, I don't plan on retiring. Who would, uh ... Uh, I don't even know what that, uh, what that means. The question is just, "How do I evolve?", "Uh, how do I continue to do what I'm good at?", "How do I continue to learn new things?", and, "How do I make a difference in the world?", and that has to change, uh, all the time. And so, I, I always say that the greatest life skill anybody could have is the, uh, is the ability to reinvent themselves, and we don't teach this, right?

We don't teach it in school. You know, we don't, uh, we don't teach it in the workplace, right? Uh, we just have to get much more comfortable with the perpetual reinvention that's required to stay relevant in this rapidly changing world that we live in.

Whitney: One of the ways we help ourselves do that is, "What are you reading and/or listening to right now that's helping you figure out ways to reinvent yourself?"

Saul: Well, I just read, uh ... I normally like tried to slip in several novels just to get my head out, you know, the traditional, you know, kind of innovation, uh, s-literature, but I just

finished the brand new book that's coming out in a couple of weeks by [Beth Comstock](#), uh, called ['Imagine It Forward'](#).

Whitney: Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Saul: And I'm about to talk with her, uh, here, uh, actually, uh, on the phone. Uh, we're gonna record a podcast together. You know, she spent 27 years at GE and rose to be the Vice Chairman, and listening to her, uh, talk about how she approached big institutional change and transformation was really, uh, you know, really enlightening to me. You know, there are, there are too few examples of senior leaders who have really taken on this big institutional transformation challenge, and Beth is one of them.

Whitney: Well, um, Saul Kaplan, this has been an absolute pleasure. Thank you so much for, um, sharing with us, uh, your ideas, and your thinking, and-and, and how, what you're trying to get done in the world. I-I know you have been a wonderful, big influence in my life to, for which I'm very grateful, and I'm very excited for our listeners to be able to hear from you. Thank you for being here today.

Saul: Thanks, Whitney. Just, uh, wonderful to, to talk with you today.

My biggest takeaway from the conversation with Saul is the reminder that sometimes the way we've been doing things doesn't serve us anymore. As Marshall Goldsmith shares, "What got you here won't get you there." He had his pile of spreadsheets on how to create an important, innovative conference. And Richard Saul Wurman. Said -- nope, not going to work. That was pivotal for Saul. And now, because of this new way of thinking about the conference and the form it has taken. He takes that lens of - what got you here won't get you there - into his work with organizations and even in how he is thinking about his current learning curve.

Also, we become so enamored with technology. About the next big thing on the horizon, blockchain, AI, UX, VR...but we often forget that technology is only as useful as the problem it solves for us as human beings. Best illustrated by the fact that the central feature in a conference for innovation junkies is the relationships and storytelling between people. Creating conditions where stories can be swapped, given and received is what allows for innovation to take hold

Practical tip:

Is there something you do on a regular basis in a specific way, like the way I over prepare for my keynotes, that you can try differently? Just once? It's an experiment. And make note of what you learned.

Thank you to Heidi Benjaminsen for leaving our review of the week on Amazon. She said -

Johnson's real-world examples are truly inspiring. She provides diagnostic tools to evaluate yourself and your team to see where your strengths are. This book is required reading if you want to build, retain, promote and develop A Team contributors.

Thank you so much, Heidi!

If you'd like to learn more about my latest book Build an A Team my book with Harvard Business Press, download the first chapter at whitneyjohnson.com/ateam.

Thank you again to Saul Kaplan for being our guest, thank you to sound engineer Whitney Jobe, manager / editor Macy Robison, content contributors Emilie Davis and Libby Newman, and art director Brandon Jameson.

I'm Whitney Johnson
And this is Disrupt Yourself.